

# MANAGING STAKEHOLDER PRECONCEPTIONS THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE TRANSPORT DATA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Rangiora Town Centre 2020 project is a high-priority, high-profile project for the Waimakariri District Council. The project seeks to create a more vibrant, community-orientated and economically robust town centre, and to plan for and manage the effects of that change.*

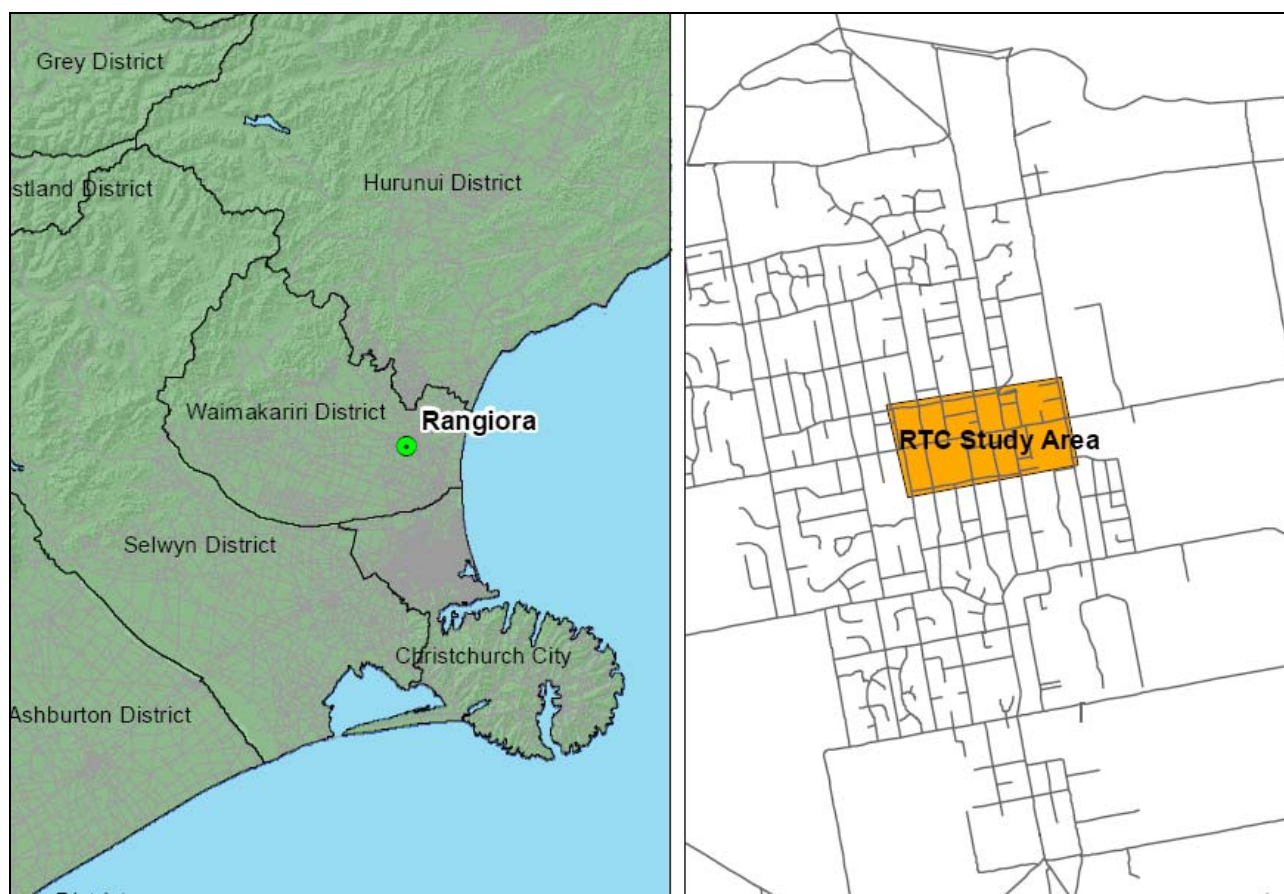
*This technical note describes the success of the holistic, strategic and multi-disciplinary approach Abley Transportation Consultants adopted to investigate issues and identify opportunities in the Rangiora town centre. It illustrates the importance of collecting accurate transport data to inform decision-making, support or counter the preconceptions of stakeholders as to the extent or cause of transport issues, and what should and should not be done to address these issues. It discusses the reasons why this approach has resulted in a very high level of support from the community and examines the lessons that can be learnt from this approach.*

*This presentation should have broad appeal to transport planning and engineering professionals that work in the public and private sector who have to deal with a community frustrated by transport issues and seeking techniques to manage the preconceptions of stakeholders.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Waimakariri District is located immediately north of the Waimakariri River in North Canterbury. The Waimakariri River forms the southern boundary of the Waimakariri District with both Christchurch City and Selwyn District further west. The Waimakariri District Profile (2007) shows the resident population of the Waimakariri District was around 42,000 with more than 12,000 residing in the Rangiora Ward. Rangiora is the main urban centre of the District and around 30,000 people that live either in Rangiora or the surrounding areas identify Rangiora as their local service centre. Rangiora is located about 30 minutes by car from the centre of Christchurch City and a large number of commuter trips are made across the Waimakariri River to Christchurch each day.

Rangiora's population is projected to grow rapidly over the next two decades as the area develops in alignment with the urban limits set by Proposed Change 1 to the Canterbury Regional Policy Statement (2007). Based on these projections, and taking into account anticipated growth elsewhere in the District, it is estimated that by 2021 the Rangiora Town Centre (RTC) could be providing goods and services for about 38,000 people and by 2031 this number could have climbed to 48,000 people, as reported in the Waimakariri RTC 2020 Strategy (2010). The location of Waimakariri District in the context of its environs, and the extent of the study area is shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1: Parking Duration in Rangiora Town Centre**

In 2009, Council identified that this rapid population growth will generate a number of significant challenges for the RTC. Council identified the best means of tackling these challenges was to formulate a comprehensive approach to the management of the Town Centre. In September 2009, Council formalised its decision to prepare a RTC Strategy and set a 2020 implementation horizon for the study i.e. the RTC 2020 Strategy. Following the decision to prepare the strategy, Council condensed the challenges facing the Town Centre down into three key themes, namely:

- ✓ Providing for Growth
- ✓ Improving Access
- ✓ Enhancing Character and Quality

To assist with the development of the strategy, Council engaged four consultant groups covering transportation, urban design, planning and retail. The consultants were tasked to provide guidance and advice on how to best address current issues and meet the future demands in order to create a sustainable, prosperous, vibrant, easily accessible, safe and pedestrian-friendly Town Centre.

## **COMMUNITY RESPONSE EXISTING TRANSPORT PROVISIONS**

The configuration of streets, intersections and parking in the RTC has been changing regularly over the past 30 years. The most recent major change occurred in 2005, when a section of High Street was converted from two-way to one-way and the priority at the Town Centre's main intersection, known as Red Lion Corner, was changed from east-west to north-south. Other notable aspects of the transport network to change at this time included the construction of a roundabout at the Ashley / Blakett intersection and the formalisation of a route via Albert Street away from Red Lion Corner where a number of turning movements had been banned as a result of the change in priority. The changes also enabled 60° angle parking to be introduced along on both sides of High Street along the newly created one-way section.

Council's community satisfaction surveys, which are undertaken every three years, showed these major changes to the transport network in the Town Centre resulted in a vast improvement in the community's level of satisfaction with traffic flow in the Town Centre from 22% in 2004 to 48% in 2007. However, a 10% decline in satisfaction in the most recent survey (2010) suggested that further change was needed to address traffic issues within the Town Centre. The level of community satisfaction with off-street parking also showed a general decline over time, reflective of ever-increasing difficulty with finding a parking space in the Town Centre, and demonstrated a community desire for intervention.

The level of discontent with the existing transport provisions in and around the Town Centre reached a crescendo in late 2009 when a community petition seeking the re-opening of Alfred Street, a street running parallel to and to the south of High Street, was submitted to Council. The reaction to the Alfred Street closure, including the petition that was received by the Council, indicated the depth of community feeling about the many issues surrounding the Town Centre i.e. accessibility, movement, appearance, safety and usage, and became the main driver for the development of the RTC 2020 Strategy. Alfred Street was re-opened to traffic in late 2010.

## **RTC 2020 STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH**

The objective of the RTC 2020 Strategy was to develop a decision-making framework for Council to make some positive changes to the RTC from now until the year 2020. Abley Transportation Consultants (Abley) was appointed to provide expert transportation planning and engineering advice in relation to the preparation of the RTC 2020 Strategy. The primary focus of Abley's involvement was around the theme of 'Improving Access' and accessibility.

Council established a Steering Group and two Reference Groups as part of the project. The role of the Steering Group, comprising elected and community representatives, was to guide the direction of the strategy, while the two Reference Groups were formed to ensure the interests of business and property owners, and users of the Town Centre were represented. Abley was required to investigate the current and future transport issues facing the RTC and to identify a number of options to discuss with the Steering Group, Reference Group and general public that would ultimately form part of the RTC 2020 Strategy.

### **Identification of Transport Issues**

Prior to commencing technical investigations, Council forewarned Abley about the growing level of discontent in the community with the current state of access and parking provisions in the Town Centre. Abley identified that Council's historic approach to dealing with transport issues in the Town Centre had generally been responsive to specific issues as they arose, rather than planning

for ongoing change. Abley identified that this ad-hoc approach was a probable cause for the community's dissatisfaction with the transport function of the Town Centre. Abley concluded that such an approach would no longer be suitable for a Town Centre that desired to maintain its competitiveness with growing retail centres in the south and east of the District and at Belfast in the north of Christchurch City.

The entire process needed to be handled delicately. There was a high level of scepticism, especially with the Steering Group, that the new consultant would simply repeat the perceived poor transport outcomes now evident in the Town Centre. Abley took a first principals approach to the project in a holistic and strategic manner; identifying the root causes for existing transport issues. This required the collection of a substantial body of up-to-date data on movement and parking patterns in and around the Town Centre. Abley (2010) undertook four main pieces of data collection and analysis to inform the assessment of the causes for the existing transport issues. These being:

- ✓ Pedestrian Activity Survey
- ✓ Town Centre Parking Survey
- ✓ Rangiora Traffic Patterns Study
- ✓ Number Plate Geo-Coding Analysis

A description of these surveys, the analysis and findings is shown on the Poster Board.

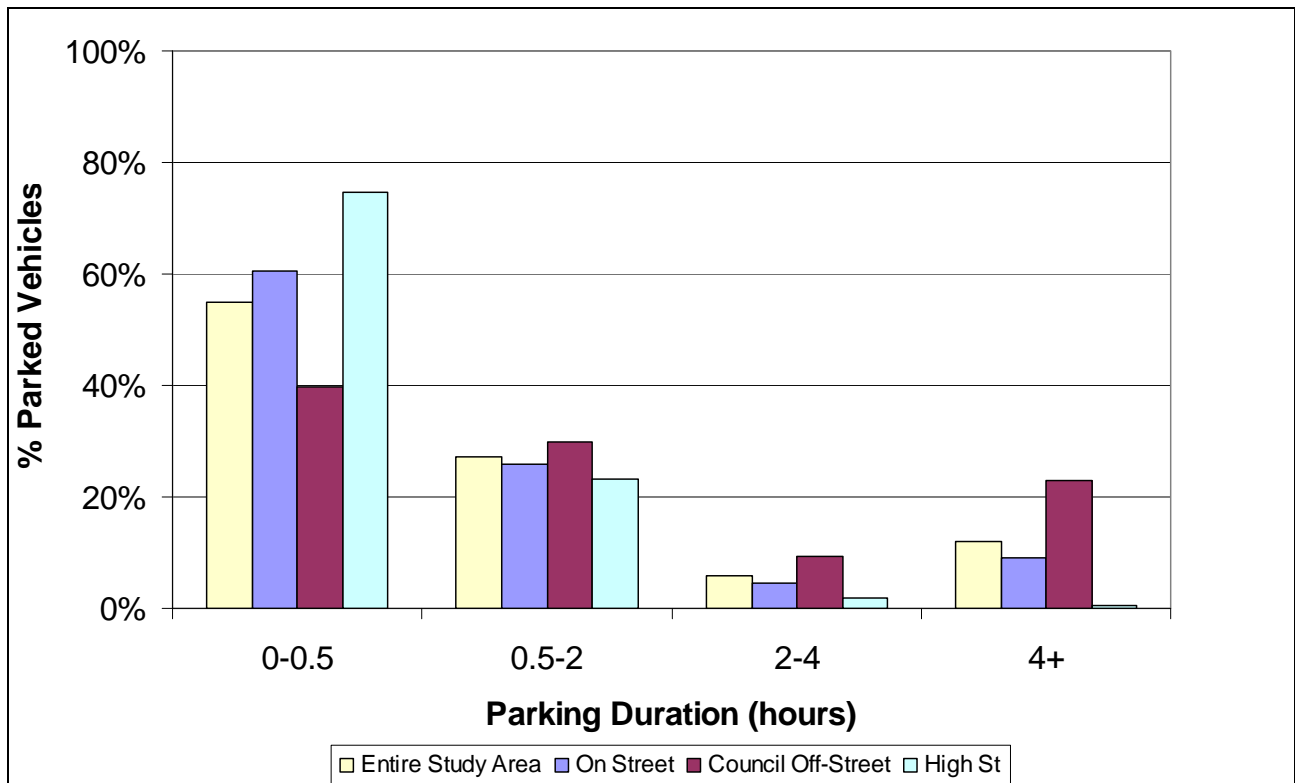
### **Identification of Transport Opportunities**

A key milestone of the RTC 2020 Strategy development was a three-day workshop for invited key community stakeholders and a one-day public open day. A feature of the workshop was the discussion of issues and opportunities under each of the three key themes. Abley facilitated groups to examine 'access' issues and to discuss and develop concepts that would fulfil the transport environment desired for the Town Centre.

The workshop commenced with an atmosphere of 'us versus them'. Community representatives held very strong views regarding the cause of problems in the Town Centre and the most typical method proposed of addressing the issues was one of 'provide more'. Provide more parking, remove restrictions, and therefore improve access. Abley was able to use the transport data collected from surveys and analyses to support or counter the preconceptions of stakeholders as to the extent or cause of specific transport issues. There were a number of incorrect presumptions in the community particularly regarding the length of parking duration, especially in the High Street, and the proportion of long-distance travel occurring through the RTC.

When opportunities were discussed, many immediately discounted the prospect of any change in parking provision in terms of reduced supply, shorter restrictions or charging; suggesting any such change would end of the viability of their business. Abley was able to use the parking study information to demonstrate opportunities to improve the parking experience in the Town Centre and how changes in parking management would simply reflect the current behaviour of the vast majority of visitors to the Town Centre.

An example was the concept of shortening time restrictions in High Street to deter long-stay parking and increase vehicle turnover. Abley referred to the parking surveys that demonstrated that around 75% of all parking in High Street was for less than 30 minutes. Consequently reducing the existing 120 minute restriction would only require a change for the minority of visitors. **Figure 2** shows categorised parking duration over the entire RTC by specific area.



**Figure 2: Parking Duration in Rangiora Town Centre**

Transport opportunities were developed without preconceived ideas of the best solution and were developed in a collaborative manner with key stakeholders. While it was important that the stakeholders considered the solutions were of their own design, it was more important the solutions were also technically sound. Abley achieved this by guiding stakeholders towards solutions that were technically feasible and would contribute positively to the outcomes sought from the strategy. By the end of the workshop, many of the doubters had become allies of the approach adopted by Abley and Council to address access issue in the Town Centre. This support continued when the RTC 2020 Issues and Concepts document went through public consultation in June 2010.

**RTC 2020 STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND FEEDBACK**

Abley identified three key areas that required intervention to improve accessibility to and within the RTC.

**1. Red Lion Corner**

Despite having been modified substantially in 2005, and contrary to findings of earlier reports, there remained a perception in the community that a significant number of vehicles, especially heavy vehicles, without an origin or destination in Rangiora, were passing through Rangiora. The community considered this issue was most pronounced at Red Lion Corner.

The survey work Abley completed to inform the Rangiora Traffic Patterns showed that around 15% of heavy vehicles passing through Rangiora had did not an origin or destination in the town. Despite this, heavy vehicles do form a relatively high proportion of all vehicles passing through Red Lion Corner. This combined with the intersections current configuration is seen as a barrier to integration of the RTC east to west across the intersection. The current alignment impedes access to High Street from the east (High Street is one-way west to east where it intersects Red Lion Corner) and makes exiting the town centre from High Street in an easterly or southbound direction difficult. Even though many movements are banned at the intersection, the offset approaches make negotiation of the intersection complex, especially for pedestrians.

Abley identified that management of Red Lion Corner was key to the success for providing improved accessibility. Abley proposed that the offset north-south alignment should be realigned and the intersection signalised. The introduction of a signalised intersection at Red Lion Corner would significantly improve access to the town centre from the east, and open up the opportunity to restore two-way traffic on High Street between Percival and Ashley Streets. The majority of submitters (68%) supported this concept. These results correlated well with those highlighted in the RTC 2010 Business Survey, where Red Lion Corner was seen as particularly problematic and difficult by town centre businesses, and vehicle access and flow an aspect highly disliked.

## **2. High Street**

The current one-way traffic flow west to east with angled parking on both sides means, while this configuration offers large amount of parking and a slow speed environment, no cars can enter directly from the east. Abley identified a number of options for the future configuration of High Street. Abley ensured the community was aware that the introduction of two-way traffic on High Street would necessitate a review of the current angle parking layout, with a return to kerbside parallel parking being the favoured option.

The most supported concept for High Street was the creation of a two-way High Street with parallel parking on both sides. One in three submitters (31%) favoured this option. Those in support of this option thought it would improve traffic flow significantly by allowing access from the east, which would make High Street more practical, safe and visitor friendly, as well as less congested. This loosely aligned with the findings from the RTC 2010 Business Survey, which found that some town centre businesses believed reverting High Street back to two-way traffic would create better traffic flow and less confusion for visitors.

## **3. Parking Management**

The RTC is nearing a critical point in terms of parking. While overall parking demand for the whole the Town Centre remains moderate (51%), the most destination convenient on-street and off-street parking spaces are highly demanded being in excess of 80% occupied from 9am to 3pm. As parking demand gets closer to reaching supply, it will become increasingly difficult to find a parking space, the number of circulating vehicles will increase and the level of non-compliance with the parking restrictions is expected to increase. Parking demand on streets further from the Town Centre can also be expected to increase. Ultimately, the attractiveness of driving to the Town Centre may decrease as parking spaces become increasingly difficult to find.

Submissions on the management of parking in the Town Centre showed significant support for more parking in or around the current Blake Street area, including Blakett Street, and many would like to see a multi-storey car parking building erected. Some would like to see more on/off-street car parking supplied to the north or south of High Street. The RTC 2010 Business Survey also identified improving car parking, largely by providing more, as the predominant change businesses would like to see made.

Council identified there was demand for additional retail floor space to be provided within the Town Centre and the most likely place for this to occur is in areas currently used for off-street parking. Interestingly 22% of all land in the RTC area is currently dedicated to the provision of parking. Accordingly, it is unlikely that the overall quantum of parking spaces in the Town Centre could be increased without major investment in a multi-storey parking building or purchase of a site(s) outside the current Town Centre area to convert into a public parking area.

Abley identified that parking in the Town Centre would best be addressed in the long-term by carefully managing the demand / supply relationship through the development of a parking management strategy. This would be likely to include the identification of opportunities to improve signage, consideration of the distribution of parking spaces for people with disabilities, and the areas for time restricted parking of appropriate durations.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The Council adopted the RTC Strategy in September 2010. Abley has recently commenced work to evaluate the effectiveness of different options for Red Lion Corner, and to develop a parking management strategy that will guide Council's approach to parking in the Town Centre for the coming 10 years.

## LESSONS LEARNT

Transport is a highly provocative and emotional topic for many. Tackling transport issues for an entire Town Centre is a process that needs to be handled delicately. The aim is to identify means of improving the transport situation with the support of the community, as without support, the best technical plans may never come to fruition.

The key lessons learnt from being involved in the development of RTC 2020 Strategy are:

- ✓ The importance of collecting accurate up-to-date data. Objective data is important for every transport project. Its importance cannot be understated when consulting with a community that have very strong, and often sharply divided opinions. Abley used the transport data collected from surveys and analysis to support or counter the preconceptions of stakeholders as to the extent or cause of transport issues.
- ✓ Explore and develop transport issues and opportunities in a collaborative manner with stakeholders. Forcing a solution on a community will inevitably be met with opposition. Guiding stakeholders towards solutions that are technically feasible and contribute positively to the outcomes sought from a strategy will enhance the prospect of those solutions being accepted by the community.

## REFERENCES

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